

IT'S CHUCK'S



WORLD — WE JUST LIVE IN IT

He's kicked Bruce Lee around, halted an army of Commies and is best buddies with President Bush. He's a cult hero, an enigma, a force of nature with a ginger beard. At the personal invitation of the man himself, *Empire* flies to Texas to face Chuck Norris on home turf...

WORDS NICK DE SEMLYEN

WITHIN THE CAVERNOUS BOWELS OF THE FRANK ERWIN CENTER, AN INDOOR ARENA IN CENTRAL AUSTIN, TEXAS, THERE'S A CHARGE OF ANTICIPATION. As the furious beats of The Prodigy's Firestarter dim to nothing on the stadium's sound system, the assembled audience, much of it made up of US military personnel, crane their necks forward. Onto the stage marches a solitary figure sporting a dark suit, buffed boots and ginger beard. He's a man who's dealt out justice, decimated armies and taken no shit for nearly half a century. And he's familiar to everyone in the room, not least because his face adorns huge screens along with slogans like, "Any references to Chuck Norris without express permission will result in a roundhouse kick to the face." He lifts up his microphone, grins, and the crowd goes berserk.

There is no theory of evolution. Just a list of animals Chuck Norris allows to live. (chucknorrisfacts.com)

By all rights, Chuck Norris should have been forgotten long ago. His most revered movie is also his first, the 1972 chopsocky classic *Way Of The Dragon*, in which he brawled with Bruce Lee. Since then, the martial arts master has put out a succession of deadly earnest one-man-army actioners whose very titles — *A Force Of One*, *An Eye For An Eye*, *Lone Wolf McQuade* — reek of undistilled machismo and stiff-necked silliness. Watching him cut through endless swathes of evildoers, the critics have often been unkind. Of 1982's *Silent Rage*, *The New York Times* wrote, "He has no screen presence to speak of, but nothing terribly offensive working against him, either. He is just sort of there."

But his movies, often directed by his brother Aaron, kept on making money. And as the years went by and Norris stuck doggedly to his loner persona — an invincible, patriotic shitkicker of few words and fewer expressions — something strange happened. He slowly became a myth, a legend, a cult figure who transcends his questionable filmography. His movies began to be reappraised as comedy, lapped up by a new army of fans who have filled YouTube with homemade highlight reels — clips full of overblown violence and po-faced one-liners such as, "I'm gonna hit you with so many rights, you'll beg for a left."

And pop culture started to embrace him. In 2004, he popped up in *Frat Pack* comedy *Dodgeball*. In 2006, *Adult Swim*, home of cult TV shows like *Robot Chicken*, began airing repeats of his ill-fated '80s cartoon show, *Karate Kommandos*. Most entertainingly, a series of Paul

Bunyanesque one-liners, labelled "Chuck Norris Facts", spread around the internet like grassfire, riffing on his mystique. To wit: "When God said, 'Let there be light,' Chuck Norris said, 'Say please.'"

Despite all this kerfuffle, the man himself has remained on stealth mode, as hard to track as the ninjas he pushes around in 1980's *The Octagon*. *Empire* began its search over a year ago, putting in dozens of calls to the States in an attempt to lock down an interview with the elusive star of *Forced Vengeance*. It wasn't easy — Norris operates independently of Hollywood, preferring to work from his Texas base with a close circle of trusted associates. But finally, out of the blue, a terse email winged its way from the Deep South. He was leaving his ranch to host the finals of his World Combat League tournament, and he was ready to talk. >>



Chuck: Hosting the World Combat League finals.

DARRYL ROBBINS (2)



Chuck: Staring down Bruce Lee in *Way of the Dragon*.



Taking names in *Delta Force 2*.

HAVING FEASTED ON A MARATHON OF NORRIS DVDS BEFORE THE FLIGHT, EMPIRE IS MORE THAN A LITTLE NERVOUS ABOUT THE PROSPECT OF MEETING THE SIX-TIME KARATE WORLD CHAMPION. There's not a lot of small-talk, or indeed big-talk, in his canon — Norris concludes most of his on-screen chats by kicking the other fellow through a window or setting them on fire. It's the day before the WCL event and the violent churning in *Empire's* stomach isn't alleviated by waiting in the sombre lobby of The Driskill, a grand hotel built by a 19th century cattle baron, or the fact that two poker-faced Texas state troopers suddenly materialise, summoning us to the Lone Wolf's suite.

Happily, when Norris appears with his wife and two youngest kids, it's quickly clear that he's nothing like his badass, virtually mute screen self. Dressed down in a grey short-sleeved shirt and a good deal shorter than he looks onscreen, he's instantly warm and talkative, gripping *Empire's* hand in what turns out to be a handshake and not the first stage of a death-move. After settling down in the suite's plush sofa, the 67 year-old gives a recap of a Christmas holiday that only he could have.

"The troops in Iraq have been pestering their commanders to get me over there," he grins. "A general called and I said, 'I'd be glad to, but I want to go to where they don't get celebrities.' So I went to 11 places no-one's heard of, slept in the hooch with the troops, with the latrine 50 yards down the road. It was great. In fact, one of the tanks had my name on the barrel. They got me in the tank and I fired off a shell at an insurgent group!"

Presumably it killed the lot of them?

"THIS CHRISTMAS I GOT IN A TANK AND FIRED AT IRAQI INSURGENTS."

He laughs loudly. "Well, I don't know — that shell goes ten miles..."

Chuck Norris grinds his coffee with his teeth and boils the water with his own rage.

It was the Chuck Norris Facts that got him out to the war zone in the first place, being particularly popular within the ranks of the US army. Norris admits he was shocked when he found he was the subject of this cult veneration. "I suddenly started getting emailed all these Facts from Africa and everywhere you can think of. I was surprised, but as I'm reading them I'm going, 'These are pretty funny...' I called the guy who started it, a freshman in Rhode Island, and invited him to come meet me. He was a nice young man, and called me four months later to say he'd had over 300 million hits on the Facts. It's incredible! I take it as a great compliment from the young people."

If you want to find the roots of Norris' steel-skinned, morals-enforcing onscreen persona, you have to look back to his troubled childhood in Wilson, Oklahoma, living in poverty and the shadow of an alcoholic father. "He was negligent, abusive, exactly the kind of person I didn't want to be. So I would spend my Saturdays at

the movie theatre, escaping into another world." The heroes of '50s Westerns were surrogate fathers, and he became determined to be the good role model his pa never was. "When I got into the film business, my aim was to adopt a positive persona, of a guy who fights against injustice. And it saved me, because my acting was atrocious to say the least!"

Ah yes, the acting. Well, true, he ain't Anthony Hopkins, and clearly there are few outside Texas who take his work seriously — in the last year alone he's been referenced in a trio of comedies: *Epic Movie*, *Talladega Nights* and *Hot Fuzz*. So how does the man himself regard his key work? You've heard of Scorsese On Scorsese; this is Norris On Norris...

WAY OF THE DRAGON (1972)

THE ONE IN WHICH CHUCK NORRIS DIES...

"I was still the world karate champion then. Bruce Lee, my old work-out partner from Los Angeles, called me up out of the blue, saying, 'I'm gonna do a fight scene in

the Colosseum in Rome, like two gladiators fighting.' I said, 'Bruce, I've seen your films and you annihilate everybody. It's gonna be a one-way fight.' He said, 'No, no, no, I know you and respect you: it will be a seesaw battle.' The producer wanted me to look bigger than Bruce so I had to put on almost 20 pounds. That's why I don't do jump-kicks — I couldn't get off the ground!"

GOOD GUYS WEAR BLACK (1978)

THE ONE IN WHICH CHUCK NORRIS DROP-KICKS A MOVING CAR...

"I wrote the screenplay for *Good Guys* myself, but with way too much dialogue. The critics crucified me. I took Steve McQueen to see it and he said, 'Let me give you some advice: don't be saying things for the sake of it, only say things people will remember.' So that's what I've done, try to find lines that people will repeat to me on the street. Cool things like, 'If I want your opinion I'll beat it out of you.'"

LONE WOLF MCQUADE (1983)

THE ONE IN WHICH CHUCK NORRIS DOLES OUT WESTERN JUSTICE BY KICKING DAVID CARRADINE IN THE HEAD...

"Roy Rogers, Gene Autry, John Wayne — these men had the code of the West. *Lone Wolf* was written for Clint Eastwood, but Clint was obligated to do another movie. I know Clint but we're not close friends; he's a real quiet guy, not very articulate, so it's difficult to sit down and have a conversation with him. As for David Carradine — not a great martial artist but a good actor. I really liked him in *Kill Bill*."

MISSING IN ACTION 1-3 (1984-88)

THE ONES IN WHICH CHUCK NORRIS FIGHTS FOR THE AMERICAN WAY IN THE VIETNAM JUNGLE. AND BITES A RAT TO DEATH...

"Those films had a special meaning for me as my brother was killed in Vietnam. We filmed in the Philippines, and one day some seriously bad guys came into our camp. They recognise me, so I'm signing autographs as they're aiming guns at my head and taking my money. (*Laughs*) The torture-by-rat scene? I'll never forget that. It was during my young and foolish stage, so when it turned out there was no fake rat, I said, 'Kill a real one.' They hung me



Going full throttle in *The Delta Force*.

FEET OF FURY

THERE AIN'T NO PROBLEM CHUCK CAN'T SOLVE WITH HIS FEET...

FOREST WARRIOR (1996)



GREEDY LUMBERJACKS?

KICK 'EM!

HERO AND THE TERROR (1988)



SLEAZY LOW-LIVES?

KICK 'EM!

MISSING IN ACTION 2 (1983)



VIETCONG?

KICK 'EM!

INVASION USA (1985)



COMMUNISTS?

KICK 'EM!

Chuck goes to war: in Vietnam (below) for Missing In Action 2, and Iraq (right) in December 2006.



Chuck: Hanging with Bush Senior.

“VIOLENCE IS NOT THE ANSWER — THE ANSWER IS LOVE.”

upside down, put the sack over my head, I got the rat in my mouth and there's fake blood coming down the rope into my mouth. All I can taste is mountain rat and I'm thinking, 'I'm gonna get the bubonic plague.'”

INVASION USA (1985)

THE ONE IN WHICH CHUCK NORRIS STOPS COMMUNISTS TAKING OVER AMERICA BY BLOWING THEM UP...

“In my movies I don't initiate violence unless it's really necessary. Violence is not the answer — the answer is love. I think Christians and Muslims should hug each other. There's no reason we can't all live harmoniously together and that's what I would say to the head of Iran.”

THE DELTA FORCE (1986)

THE ONE IN WHICH CHUCK NORRIS SOLVES MIDDLE EASTERN TERRORISM BY FIRING MISSILES FROM A MOTORBIKE...

“The image of me on the rocket-launcher motorcycle was used as an official poster for the war in Iraq. I screened Delta Force for former President Bush in the White House, and also for the Senate. They were getting ready to have a bill passed and got up midway through the screening. Then I saw Bob Dole stop at the top of the aisle, turn around and watch the whole rest of the movie by himself. They had to put that in the Senate minutes, that they were late for the vote because Bob Dole was watching Delta Force!”

FOREST WARRIOR (1996)

THE ONE IN WHICH CHUCK NORRIS CAN TRANSFORM INTO A BEAR, A WOLF OR AN EAGLE...

“In Forest Warrior I could change into different creatures of the forest, which kids thought was neat. Once I was watching a basketball game with my four year-old niece on my lap and felt this squeezing on my thumb. She goes, 'I want Uncle Chuck to turn into a bear!'”

DODGEBALL (2004)

THE ONE IN WHICH CHUCK NORRIS GIVES A CRUCIAL THUMBS-UP. THANK YOU, CHUCK NORRIS!

“I was in LA when they asked me to do the cameo — I said no at first because it was a three-hour drive down to Long Beach. Then Ben Stiller calls. He goes, 'Chuck, please, you've got to do this for me!' My wife said he should send a helicopter for me and that's what happened. I didn't read the screenplay, just did my bit where I stick my thumb up. When the movie comes out, we go see it. It's cute, a little risqué in some areas. But in the end, when Ben's a big fatty and watching TV, the last line of the whole movie is, 'Fuckin' Chuck Norris!' My mouth fell open to here... I said, 'Holy mackerel!' That was a shock, Ben didn't tell me about that!”



MOVIESTORE (1), CORBIS (1), USO PHOTO BY MIKE THEILER



Chuck: Killing Bill in Lone Wolf McQuade.



Chuck (right): Joining forces with a shaggy Briard in Top Dog.

NORRIS HAS ONLY PLAYED A BADDIE TWICE — IN WAY OF THE DRAGON (EVEN THERE BRUCE LEE PAYS RESPECTS TO HIS FELLEED CORPSE) AND AN ASIAN FILM CALLED YELLOW FACED TIGER:

“I played a drug lord who smokes a cigar and tries to rape his brother’s girlfriend. It wasn’t supposed to play outside of China.” But he admits he would have relished playing the Terminator. “It fit Arnold’s persona more than mine, though. We’ve been friends now for 35 years, Arnold and I — in his bodybuilding days he used to come down to my karate school and shoot the breeze. He told me in 1967 he was going to be a movie star and I was thinking, ‘A movie star? You can hardly speak English!’”

Norris has other powerful friends — a staunch Republican, he’s chummy with both Presidents Bush and is a regular visitor to the White House, where several of his gun-heavy flicks have run through the Presidential projector. Would he consider following his pal the Governor into politics? “That’s a very good question,” he says, leaning back on the sofa and touching his trademark beard. “There’s a lot to be done, I just see a total moral decay in our society. But I think I can achieve more outside the political arena. People have approached me and I’ve said, ‘Let me think about this — I’m debating my opponent on TV and they start attacking my character, I leap over the desk and shake them unconscious. Is that gonna help my campaign?’” He erupts in laughter again, grabbing *Empire*’s arm. “They go, ‘I don’t think so...’”

If at first you don’t succeed, you’re not Chuck Norris.

It proves impossible to dislike Chuck Norris. Instead of the humourless, lunk-headed reactionary you might expect, he’s turned out to be humble, self-aware and bemused by his sudden ascent to cultdom. He offers *Empire* a ride to the WCL weigh-in in his Ford people-carrier, animatedly discussing which kick he’s used most on-screen. The next evening, just before fighting commences at the event itself, he takes a break from bear-hugging war veterans to come over. This is his home turf — in Texas Chuck Norris is more popular than ribs, with no side order of irony — and everyone in the stadium wants a chance to meet him.

“I’m a people’s actor, not a critics’ actor, and I always have been,” he says, as he prepares to hit the stage. “Truthfully, I’m proud of each of my films in

“I’M PROUD OF EACH OF MY FILMS IN A CERTAIN WAY.”

a certain way.” And, true, the world of movies is a funnier, sillier, somehow better one thanks to the presence of one Carlos Ray Norris — although maybe we could all have done without that one where he teams up with a dog to tackle neo-Nazis. Seeing as we’re in the presence of the most deadly feet in show business, though, *Empire* decides not to nit-pick. And with that, Chuck Norris strides away, towards the screaming hordes.

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WAY OF THE NORRIS



CHUCK’S LIFE LESSONS, FROM HIS CLASSIC BOOK THE SECRET OF INNER STRENGTH

- 👊 “LOOK FOR OPENINGS TO PENETRATE YOUR OPPONENT’S DEFENSES. TIME YOUR ONSLAUGHT FOR WHEN HE IS INHALING.”
- 👊 “SCREEN OUT PERIPHERAL THOUGHTS. CONCENTRATE ON WHAT YOU ARE DOING, NOT ON YOUR OPPONENT.”
- 👊 “KEEP YOUR COOL. AN ANGRY FIGHTER CEASES TO THINK AS A HUMAN BEING AND RESPONDS AS AN ANIMAL.”
- 👊 “ALWAYS REMAIN LOYAL TO YOUR COUNTRY. OBEY THE LAWS OF THE LAND.”